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### Eugenics

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## Eugenics

*Maggie Donnell*

Naturally, and quite understandably, people avoid discussing the dark periods of human history, specifically the inconceivable acts of dehumanization imposed on their fellow man. Individuals struggle to understand, sometimes simply because they cannot fathom, how a person—and in some cases, an institution—can manipulate and devalue another human being or groups of people. Often, the standards by which those with the “authority” to determine the lack of worth of the individual or population are arbitrary and subjective.

All of this is relevant in a conversation over the eugenics movement of the United States, occurring in the early to mid-twentieth century. In case this movement does not sound familiar, eugenics is defined as:

...the philosophy and social movement that argues it is possible to improve the human race and society by encouraging reproduction by people or populations with “desirable” traits (termed “positive” eugenics) and discouraging reproduction by people with “undesirable” qualities (termed “negative” eugenics) (“What is eugenics?” Personal Genetics Education Project, [www.pged.org](http://www.pged.org)).

When considering the eugenics movement’s prominence in the political and social culture of the United States for many decades, one important question may arise: are the underlying thought-processes of the eugenics movement fundamental to the United States and its values as a nation? To answer this question, an analysis of the three founding documents of the country must be undertaken: *The Declaration of Independence*, *The Constitution of the United States*, and *The Gettysburg Address*.

After completing an analysis, one can formulate a strong argument against eugenics within the three founding documents of the United States. While these documents carry weight in their own historical context, one can merely examine the documents at face value, evaluating exclusively what the words themselves say.<sup>1</sup> The order in which the three documents will be scrutinized is the same order in which they were created.

Fittingly, this paper shall begin with the document that distinguished the United States as an entity of its own: *The Declaration of Independence*. One of the most recognized lines within the declaration is: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that **all** men are **created equal**, that they are **endowed by their Creator** with certain **unalienable Rights**, that among these are **Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness**” (*The Declaration of Independence*).<sup>2</sup> The writers of *The Declaration of Independence* believed that all persons possessed equal intrinsic value and were granted certain rights by their respective Creator(s)—citing life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness as some examples—that shall not be infringed upon by another.

Indeed, the very nature of eugenics does just that: encroaches on these so-called “self-evident” ideals the declaration writers so passionately believed. Both in theory and in practice, eugenics is discriminatory, exclusive, and implies an inferior/superior-complex between parties. Eugenics decides who is worthy of reproducing—determined by the supposed value they could add by contributing a child to society—while simultaneously separating them from the unworthy, whose offspring would supposedly be detrimental to a society’s future.

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<sup>1</sup> Recognizing that the thesis of this paper may be distorted by, technically, taking the three documents “out of context,” it is imperative to note that for the purposes of this paper, examining the language alone is thought to be indicative of any implicit beliefs that go beyond the current matters in which they respectively refer.

<sup>1</sup> The boldface addition was intended to emphasize the key points of the

Yet often what remains when a society is progressing forward is the tradition of the institution, not the ideas and attitudes of the people. As noted in the declaration, “**Prudence**, indeed, will dictate that **Governments** long established **should not be changed** for light and **transient cause...**” (*The Declaration of Independence*).<sup>3</sup> Stated another way, cautiousness is at the root of governments remaining stable over time and should be exercised when certain beliefs arise that will only last for a limited amount of time.

Looking throughout history, there are but a few times when certain ideas, attitudes, really components of culture are consistent. In general, they are “in style” or become the norm for a time but eventually disappear; on occasion they do make a comeback but are manifested in other forms. The same can be said about eugenics, regarding its reincarnation if you will, but that is beyond the scope of this discussion. However, what is a part of this conversation is that the framers forewarned that governments should not succumb to certain “fads.” Eugenics is included in this group of “fads” to avoid, even if it was not an explicit reference by the writers. In retrospect, one can see that those who advanced eugenics did not heed the declaration’s writer’s message, but again, this is not to be discussed in this paper. Undeniably, in the words of *The Declaration of Independence*, at the very dawn of the United States as a nation, eugenics in its purest form was not considered or even tolerated.

In addition, when considering the words of the second founding document, *The Constitution of the United States*, the foundational ideals of eugenics are not present there either. The Preamble makes this clear:

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<sup>1</sup> The boldface addition was intended to emphasize the key points of the statement.

**We** the People of the United States, in Order to form a more **perfect Union**,  
**establish Justice**, **insure** domestic **Tranquility**, provide for the **common**  
defence, **promote** the **general Welfare**, and **secure** the **Blessings of Liberty to**  
**ourselves and our Posterity...** (*The Constitution of the United States*)<sup>4</sup>

Elaborating on each specific boldfaced term would be unnecessary, teetering on the verge of redundant, so a summary of the Preamble as a whole should suffice. One can confidently assume that the writers of the constitution are passionate about the principles of unity, justice, tranquility, and liberty and hold them in high esteem—so much so they would ordain and establish an entire nation on them.

Therefore, if the nation were to support or even propagate a belief system that contradicts these very values—such as adhering to the eugenics ideology—its credibility, and more importantly its foundation, could be jeopardized. Even more so, the country and its inhabitants could be considered hypocritical by nature—surely an association that would be unfavorable. By all means, this would be the last thing the writers of the constitution would want for the United States.

Two different clauses found within Articles IV and V of *The Constitution of the United States* support an idea coined as the “rights of persons.” In Article IV, this includes the wording “The right of the people to be secure in their persons...” and in Article V, “...nor be deprived of life, liberty, or property...” (*The Constitution of the United States*). Underscoring both of these clauses is the strong-held belief that individuals are entitled to possess security in oneself and the two of the “self-evident” rights, now including property as well, that were initially noted in *The*

*Declaration of Independence*. Together, these highlight that in the founding of the United States people, for no other reason but for their being, deserve certain rights that shall not be unabridged by any person nor institution. As previously mentioned, eugenics in and of itself opposes the rights of persons.

The final founding document of The United States of America to be examined is *The Gettysburg Address*. Alluding to the great documents set before it, "...a new nation, conceived in liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal" (*The Gettysburg Address*), it confirms the conception and dedication of the founders of the nation to these ideals. Abraham Lincoln continues by stating that having strayed from abiding by them, there must be an active effort on behalf of the people to uphold them forevermore.

He asserts in the latter half of his address:

It is for us the **living**, rather, to be **dedicated here to the unfinished work ... to the great task remaining** before us ... that **this nation ... shall have a new birth of freedom**, and that **government of the people, by the people, for the people...** (*The Gettysburg Address*).<sup>5</sup>

Lincoln sees the sacrifice of those who perished in the Civil War as a noble one: defending the founding ideals of the nation. Individuals who survived should not forget but rather see their life as an opportunity to finish what they started. In order to accomplish this mighty feat, a renewal to pursue the founding ideals of the nation, that is liberty and that all men are created equal, must ensue, at which point the country can do what it was originally created to do: be of the people, by the people, and for the people.

Humanity is a central theme in Lincoln's address. To be quite frank, Lincoln would be utterly repulsed at the idea that individuals were, in a sense, giving up on the potential of their fellow man through eugenic practices and policies. He is a firm believer in liberty and that all men are created equal. As eugenics seems to undermine these very principles, Lincoln would under no circumstances see a reason to commit to the eugenic ideals.

With confidence, at least to some degree, one can assert that the three founding documents of the United States of America—*The Declaration of Independence*, *The Constitution of the United States*, and *The Gettysburg Address*—fundamentally juxtapose the underlying ideals of the eugenics movement. If put into their historical contexts, one could pose a strong argument in opposition to the one above. No matter which stance is taken, though, it is evident that where these three documents promote and strive for liberty and equality, eugenics blatantly disregards both of these ideals and replaces them with insecurity.